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ABSTRACT

School counselor supervision, evaluation, and professional development are critical to the successful implementation of a school guidance program. This discussion contributes to understanding the benefits and necessity of an appraisal system for counselors that is aligned with the comprehensive guidance program model. This document describes the experiences of the Austin Independent School District when they executed a five-year plan for restructuring their guidance and counseling program and implementing the comprehensive guidance program model. Recommendations for others undergoing this process are provided along with lessons learned. (JDM)

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Ensuring Professionally Relevant Supervision and Professional Development: A District-Level Experience

by

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Chapter Sixteen

Ensuring Professionally Relevant Supervision and Professional Development: *A District-Level Experience*

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The issues of school counselor supervision, evaluation, and professional development have been identified by many as critical to the successful implementation of guidance in schools. This discussion will contribute to the understanding of the benefits and absolute necessity of having an appraisal system for counselors that is aligned with the comprehensive guidance program model.

The primary purpose of evaluating the performance of professional school counselors is to strive for the provision of the highest quality services to students. Relating the data gathered regarding a counselor's performance to established performance standards allows strengths and weaknesses to be identified. The weaknesses become targets for enhancement, and the strengths become the foundation on which to build not only improved performance but also an improved program. As individuals move closer to becoming ideal professionals, performance evaluation provides a means for identifying those who are able to make special contributions and those who are potential leaders (Maliszewski, n.d.).

Developing a Performance Evaluation Instrument for School Counselors

In this monograph, the experiences of a large, urban school district will be used to illustrate the issues related to performance appraisal for counselors. The Austin Independent School District executed a five-year plan for the restructuring of guidance and counseling and the implementation of the comprehensive guidance program model. Prior to the full implementation of this model, the counselors' performance had been evaluated using a 15-year-old instrument entitled the Non-

Teaching Professionals Appraisal Form. This generic evaluation instrument had been used to evaluate professionals who performed a very wide range of responsibilities other than direct teaching. This instrument contained many evaluation categories that were irrelevant to counselor functions and allowed no appropriate connections to the competencies called for within the comprehensive guidance program model. Counselors with excellent competencies had no plans for growth, and counselors with deficiencies had no clear direction for accountability and improvement. Too often, less than favorable evaluations were attributed to personality clashes with the appraiser rather than nonperformance of critical competencies. Moreover, in the absence of a clear understanding of the comprehensive guidance program model, appraisal was complicated by the conflicting expectations of the appraiser and the counselor.

In the beginning stages of the comprehensive guidance implementation process, voluntary compliance at the campus level was permitted. Implementing a counselor appraisal system aligned with the model promoted the concept that these new expectations for performing counseling functions were important both to the counselor and to the administrator-appraiser because these were the criteria on which the counselor's job performance would be evaluated. It was hoped that the appraisal of specific counselor competencies would promote the implementation of those competencies and the reduction of other non-evaluated functions.

Successes

As director of guidance for the district, I headed the process of restructuring the evaluation component of the comprehensive guidance program. As a result of my experiences, I can offer several recommendations to others embarking on this process.

Take a Team Approach to Designing the Evaluation

To begin the process of restructuring the guidance program evaluation, I created a district counselor leadership team. This team consisted of professional counselors who were nominated by their colleagues and represented all levels of counseling within the district. To address the various tasks of the restructuring process, this team was divided into smaller work groups, given training in their specific area, and paid a stipend to work as a group in the evenings during the school year and for periods of time during the summer. The counselor appraisal system work group began the development of an evaluation instrument by

building on the foundation of appraisal work done by others in the field (American School Counseling Association, 1999; Gysbers & Henderson, 1994; Texas Counseling Association, 1992; Texas Education Agency, 1998). They also spent a significant amount of time researching existing instruments and systems available for use with the comprehensive guidance program model.

During the initial planning sessions, we identified a wide range of participants to involve in the process. Over the course of development, we added even more groups to ensure understanding of and support for the system. Among the participants were the director of guidance and counseling and her supervisor, the superintendent's Principals Advisory Council, the Counselor Leadership Team, all counselors (grades K–12), Human Resources Department staff, professional teacher organizations, district administrators (principals, area superintendents, and assistant superintendents), and finally, the board of trustees for approval of the completed system.

Begin with the Job Description

We recognized that the development process would have to begin from a well-defined and accepted job description for each level of counselor in the comprehensive guidance program. Therefore, it was necessary to gain a thorough understanding of the comprehensive guidance program model and the shift from the traditional job description of counselors. We felt it useful to have broad support for the language of the job descriptions from the various audiences using them: counselors and campus- and district-level administrators. We worked to refine the language and get support from a broad base of school and community stakeholders. We found that any group we wished to involve in the revision of the job descriptions needed some preliminary explanation of comprehensive guidance; otherwise the input we received amounted to the traditional limitless list of services rather than a program base. Thus, each step of the development process afforded valuable opportunities to educate users of the program.

Train District-Level Administrators in the Model

We trained my supervisor in the comprehensive guidance program model so that she could assist in familiarizing administrative staff with the components of model and the competencies that exist within each one. With this information, she could advocate for the model in various contexts where issues regarding the counselors' performance or the program were raised.

Align with Other Professional Appraisal Systems in the District

Simultaneous with the construction of the counselor appraisal system, the teacher appraisal system in the district was undergoing a similar process. We attempted to align the two systems where appropriate; for example, in the articulation of competencies and rubrics for judging their attainment. At the same time, however, we designed the counselor system to avoid some overly complex features of the teacher appraisal instrument design, thus facilitating its use by appraisers.

Design a Simple, Straightforward Process

We designed the process for appraisal to be more than a simple end-of-year checklist. At the same time, we recognized that it was important make efficient use of counselor and administrator time and not encumber the process with unnecessary steps that robbed students of counselor time. The following process was developed:

1. The counselor or counselors complete a campus priority plan (CPP) for the guidance and counseling program, based on a student needs assessment.
2. The appraiser reviews and approves the CPP.
3. The counselor collects evidence of work in the five areas of the comprehensive guidance program: guidance curriculum, individual planning, responsive services, system support, and professionalism.
4. A midyear evaluation is optional unless the counselor is newly hired or in contractual difficulty.
5. All counselors participate in a year-end final evaluation conference that includes goal setting for the following year.

We wanted to integrate the program planning process into the appraisal process to cement it as a standard step in annual guidance program planning. Therefore, we made step 1 in the appraisal process the designing of a CPP for the year based on a student needs assessment. Sharing the CPP with and having it approved by the appraiser contributed to a clear understanding and agreement about the focus of the counselor's work and the program's priorities for the year.

Dedicate Sufficient Time to Developing and Piloting the Process

Over the course of a year, the work group reported on their progress and obtained feedback from the other members of the counselor leadership team and their colleagues regarding the design of and competencies included in the appraisal. At one point in the project, based on feedback from counselors, the work group completely reformatted the original prototype to align it with the four components of the comprehensive

guidance program model. They reviewed various formats for presenting the evaluation information and reaffirmed their recommendation to implement a system rather than a checklist. Finally, the work group piloted the system for an entire school year with counselors and administrators who volunteered to participate. This pilot allowed counselors to become very familiar with the competencies expected of them and the methods for documentation prior to formal implementation.

Provide Comprehensive Guidance Program Model Training for All Appraisers

As director of guidance, I provided training sessions for all appraisers charged with evaluating counselors' performance. I formed a collaboration with the Department of Human Resources to have members of that department co-lead trainings and publish and distribute the appraisal forms. Appraisers were asked to select from a number of sessions offered at various time and locations to ensure convenience and small-group settings allowing ample discussion. Because appraisers needed a thorough understanding of the comprehensive guidance program model in order to evaluate counselors accurately, the training sessions included an in-depth review of the four components of the model (guidance curriculum, responsive services, individual planning, and system support) and the fifth area of professionalism. The training turned out to be an excellent opportunity for increasing administrators' awareness of the benefits of the model. Consistently throughout the training sessions, administrators were favorably impressed with the numbers of students who can be served when the comprehensive guidance program model is implemented. The administrators were provided handbooks of materials that included examples of work from each of the components, descriptions of evidence, sample forms, and timelines for completion of key tasks. The manual served as an overview of the model for implementation in this district.

What Didn't Work

Performance appraisal is a complicated task. Over the course of the process of developing the appraisal system, we learned many lessons and often had to take a flexible approach to the task. Discussed in this section are steps we took that we later had to correct and redesign.

Train Human Resources Staff Too

Expecting the director of human resources and human resources staff to

carry the load of development and implementation of the counselor appraisal system without an understanding of the program model and program needs was unrealistic and limiting. Early and thorough orientation to the comprehensive guidance program model would have facilitated the staff's assistance with and responsibility for the process. Likewise, discussions about evaluation strategies with any groups that were uninformed about comprehensive guidance were largely a waste of time.

Do Not Try to Cover Too Much Ground in One Appraisal Form

Having an abundance of indicators in a tool that did not align with the comprehensive guidance components was frustrating and distracting for counselors committed to implementation of the comprehensive guidance program model. Once the work group clearly organized the instrument around the components of the model, in response to feedback from colleagues, it became much easier to focus on counselor functions rather than a collection of nebulous indicators.

Avoid Timing Conflicts

Development of the counselor appraisal system began at a time when the district was implementing a new appraisal system for teachers that was radically different from the previous system and required extensive training for administrators. This reduced both administrators' available time for additional training and their tolerance for learning yet another system. In addition, some counselors felt that the process was moving too quickly and expressed concern that because their campuses were not yet able to implement comprehensive guidance, they would be held to appraisal standards that they were not allowed to demonstrate.

Make Reasonable Documentation Demands

The initial process required extensive documentation from counselors. Some felt that the documentation demands were excessive. It was determined that the process would be better served by a simple system of evidence collection than an elaborate portfolio that presented an additional chore and took time from direct programming with students. In the pilot form, not having a clear, concrete form for the counselor improvement plan was problematic. The team decided that the more structure we could provide in this area, the greater the chance that an effective and appropriate improvement plan would arise from the interaction between counselor and appraiser.

Advice to Others Developing a Counselor Appraisal System

- Take the time to educate all constituencies—counselors, parents, and administrators at all levels—before you begin the process so that the work they do and the analyses they make of the model and the related job descriptions and program expectations are well informed.
- Spend time with counselors in a variety of formats to ensure full understanding and respond to concerns, obstacles, and system implementation issues.
- Even though excellent established appraisal tools are now available, undertake an effort in your school district to go through the process of establishing a system that meets your and your students' needs and that has the support of all users.
- View the task as the development of a system of ongoing needs assessment, priority goal setting, and evaluation.
- Consider the development of a program audit to follow the individual counselor performance appraisal system, as the two are inextricably linked and supportive of each other.
- In training sessions, review the comprehensive guidance program model. (Review is always helpful, and due to the turnover in principals, there are always new administrators to educate.) Focus on benefits in terms of numbers of students served, student competencies achieved, school climate effects, discipline referral declines, etc. Address competencies within each category and how they could be operationalized at each level, the kinds of evidence that would be apparent, and in-depth descriptions of those behaviors. The district guidance curriculum, Live This!, was highlighted, as were the district guidance program's Individual Academic Career Planning process guides and CRISIS: Counselors' Responsive and Interventive Services in Schools guide. We found that principals who were already implementing comprehensive guidance programs in their schools were the best and the most vocal advocates—and they certainly had their colleagues' attention! They served to reinforce the significant benefits of having counselors involved in the delivery of a comprehensive guidance program rather than an array of clerical and administrative tasks.
- Provide training in the appraisal system to staff in human resources, employee relations, or whatever department is designated in your district to interact with counselors who are in contractual difficulty due to performance concerns. A full understanding of the system will enable these staff to advise both the counselor and the appraiser about the competencies under review and evidence of their appropriate

demonstration.

The experience of developing a counselor appraisal system in a large, urban school district highlighted the importance of having a widespread and thorough understanding of the comprehensive guidance program model among all critical constituencies in the district and community. The challenge became one of timing—does one wait until a program has been completely implemented or utilize the appraisal system as an effective tool for advancing the implementation?

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